

Region 1 Comprehensive Center Reimagining Education Series: Strategies for Innovative Systems Change

Authors

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March 2021



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The current COVID-19 pandemic conditions represent an urgent call to plan so that our education systems emerge improved. The pandemic's disruption of traditional PK–12 school structures across the United States is forcing a serious reconsideration of how our education systems operate. In a survey of parents in February 2021, half reported that their children were attending school fully remotely, whereas another 17% reported that their children were in a hybrid learning environment, and 29% of parents said their children were likely to continue to attend school in a remote learning environment indefinitely (Newall & Machi, 2021). New England is no exception; schools within states served by the Region 1 Comprehensive Center (R1CC)—Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Vermont—have replaced embedded education routines with new ways of teaching and learning (Mann & Gardinier, 2020). The widespread flexibilities and policy changes embraced during the pandemic can provide momentum for accelerating redesign efforts previously under way, as well as reimagining the implementation of strategies that increase opportunities and supports for all students. Planning strategically for the future requires systems changes based on not only lessons learned during the current crisis but also the evidence base for innovative education strategies.

The pandemic has exacerbated long-standing inequities in education opportunities and technology access (Chetty et al., 2020; Stelitano et al., 2020). In addition, the abrupt shift to remote schooling interrupted learning gains for many students, particularly students of color (Dorn et al., 2020). The resulting inequities in access and opportunity intensify the need to implement promising practices to support students who have not been served by traditional classroom models. Planning now to advance equity is especially important given the extent to which students with disabilities, students of color, students from low-income household, and rural students have been underserved by education systems during the pandemic (García et al., 2020; Gross & Opalka, 2020; Jackson & Bowdon, 2020). In Boston Public Schools, greater increases in chronic absenteeism have been reported for students of color, students with disabilities, and students classified as English learners compared with other groups of students (Martin, 2021). Across Region 1, there is evidence of increased absenteeism overall during the past year (Chrisos, 2020; Gibson, 2021; Hirschfeld, 2021).

Although the context of the pandemic highlights shortcomings within our educational systems, it also underscores the need for long-term improvement and the potential for implementing innovations at scale (Hanes, 2020; Scott, 2020). Guidance on school reopening in fall 2020 highlighted strategies to provide students with greater agency, flexibility, and personalization in what and how they learn (Reich et al., 2020). Further, the rapid uptake of online tools and the shift away from rigid school schedules resulted in creative and new approaches to learning. There also is renewed discussion of how best to support students who experience learning loss,

both as the result of current conditions and more broadly (Kaffenberger, 2020; Kuhfeld et al., 2020). Moving forward, school, district, and state education leaders can draw on lessons learned during the pandemic and their experience designing new structures to strengthen opportunities for students.

Prior to the pandemic, the Region 1 states signaled their commitment to broad systems change through support for programs and policies to advance school redesign (Great Schools Partnership, 2016; Patrick et al., 2016; Students at the Center Hub, 2017). Examples include Vermont's [Flexible Pathways Initiative](#), [New Hampshire's Performance Assessment of Competency Education \(PACE\)](#), and [Massachusetts' Innovation Pathways](#). The Region 1 states are already working to build on opportunities presented during the pandemic to reshape educational systems (see Box 1). As states look toward the future, it is important to expand on the innovative systems change work already under way across the Region 1 states to support strategies for school redesign.

Box 1. Region 1 States Respond to the COVID-19 Pandemic by Supporting Education Innovations

States have already started harnessing opportunities presented during the pandemic to rethink and reshape education systems. The following are some examples from Region 1:

- The U.S. Department of Education awarded Maine a [Rethinking Remote Education Ventures](#) grant. This grant focuses on “generating innovative remote learning models to provide equitable access to high quality remote learning opportunities for all students.” The grant also stipulates that participating school teams use design thinking principles, with the goal of equipping educators to lead systemic change.
- New Hampshire, in partnership with R1CC, is working with a network of school and district leaders on [reimagining education systems](#). This work supports selected districts in developing a plan for the 2021–22 school year that implements a reimaged vision for schooling. The project involves identifying data and using a human-centered design approach to support their work.
- In collaboration with Illinois and Iowa, Region 1 states formed a [cross-state community of practice](#) focused on assessing the quality of remote/hybrid learning. The community of practice is identifying and developing measures to evaluate student engagement, parent engagement, and teacher working conditions within a remote learning context.

Local communities also see the current crisis as an opportunity to plan for school change. For example, students, teachers, parents, and employers participating in Maine focus groups in 2020 voiced support for flexible education pathways and more opportunities for students to exercise voice and choice. Participants hoped schools would continue to take advantage of the anytime, anywhere learning opportunities afforded by remote learning technology. Employers discussed how videoconferencing and other technologies can expand opportunities, including remote student internships, work-based learning experiences, or employers volunteering in schools remotely. Employers also suggested that schools intensify efforts to bolster students' problem-solving, leadership, and critical-thinking skills—all of which students can cultivate through self-directed learning experiences (R1CC, 2020).

Three Strategies for Innovative Systems Change

To support Region 1 stakeholders in reimaging education, this paper series spotlights innovative and evidence-based education strategies that hold the potential to transform student experiences, leading to additional choices, deeper engagement, and increased preparation for students' postsecondary opportunities. These strategies are rooted in priority initiatives across the Region 1 states, and each paper highlights existing work within the region while providing suggestions to accelerate innovations (see Box 2).

Box 2. Content of the Papers

Each paper in this series provides information about one of the three strategies. These short papers include resources and practical recommendations that can be applied to school redesign efforts. Each paper includes the following information:

- Explains **why the topic is critical for education** now.
- Summarizes **existing research and evidence** related to supporting student outcomes, challenges, and connections to remote and hybrid learning contexts.
- Highlights **examples** from Region 1 schools and states that have successfully implemented or expanded related strategies.
- Outlines **action steps** that educators, schools, and policymakers can take to adopt or sustain these strategies.

Paper 1: College and career pathways to advance equity and opportunity. Broad adoption of remote communication technologies during the pandemic paved the way for students to

engage in learning experiences away from school buildings. As a result, schools have more options to support students in pursuing pathways of interest through remote learning opportunities. Flexible pathways that can be made more accessible via remote learning include the following:

- *Work-based learning* opportunities help students develop employability skills and explore career options, while simultaneously strengthening the local workforce.
- *Career and technical education* programs prepare students to enter in-demand careers by developing occupation-specific knowledge and skills.
- *Accelerated college credit* programs allow students to participate in college-level classes while in high school. Students typically earn credits toward a college degree, high school graduation, or both.

Paper 2: Approaches for assessing student learning. The Region 1 states have been developing and adopting alternative approaches for assessing student learning for many years. For example, [New Hampshire's PACE system](#) includes local performance assessments aligned with competencies to assess student learning. Some of these strategies have been adopted even further in the context of the pandemic as educators identified methods of assessing student learning in remote and hybrid contexts. During the pandemic, education leaders placed greater emphasis on authentic assessments such as student capstones, reflections, or portfolios (Martinez, 2020; Weingarten, 2020). Concerns about the impact of disruptions during the pandemic on student learning led to calls for the greater use of formative assessment strategies to support differentiated instruction (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). The following approaches play a role in innovating on traditional approaches to assessment:

- *Competency-based assessment* combines opportunities for students to demonstrate mastery of knowledge and skills with personalized pacing (Levine & Patrick, 2019; Woods, 2017). In schools that have adopted competency-based assessments, students earn course credit and advance to new curriculum units by providing evidence of proficiency in earlier learning targets.
- *Authentic assessment* evaluates students on their ability to apply skills to real-world settings or problems. It encourages students to demonstrate understanding and skills in meaningful, realistic contexts.
- *Formative assessment* is an ongoing process of evaluating students' understanding and is used to provide feedback on the needs of individuals and groups of students.

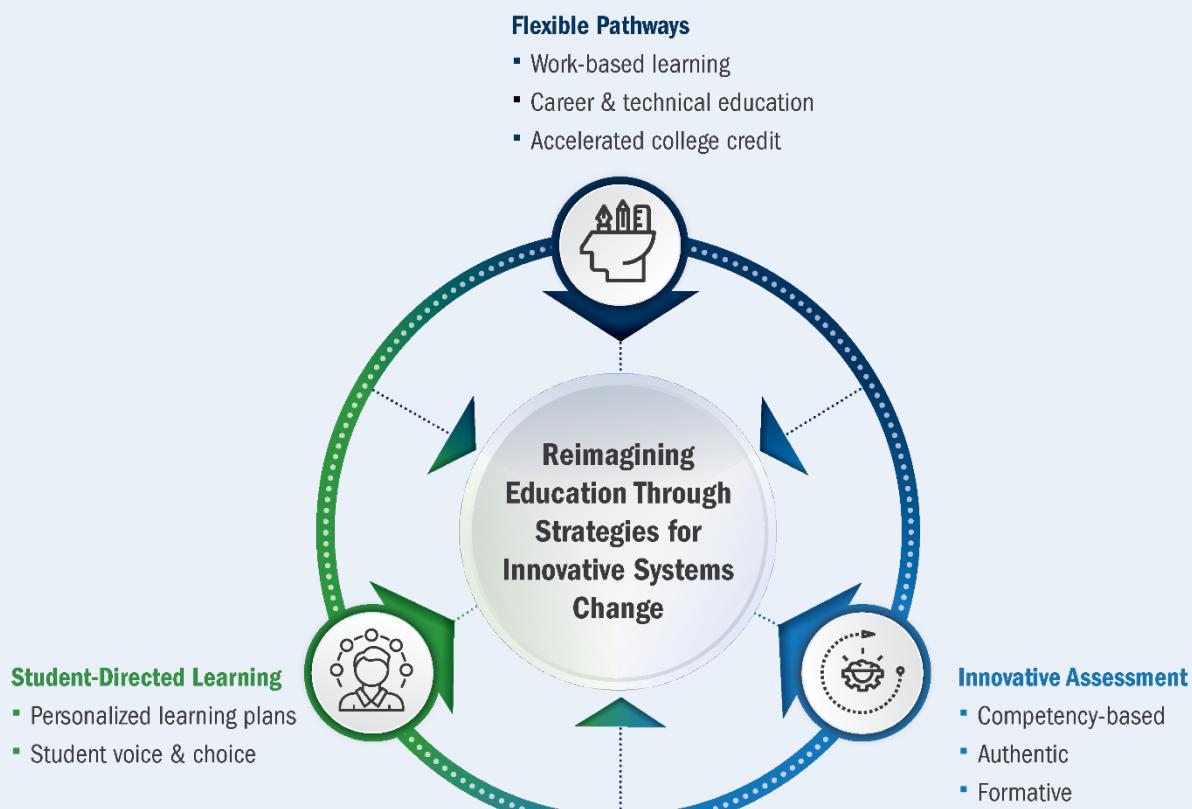
Paper 3: Strategies for student-directed learning. Absent the in-person, often segmented structure of a typical school day, learning during the COVID-19 pandemic required students to assume greater levels of responsibility for managing their time, solving problems independently, and effectively using the learning resources available to them. Even as schools across the United States transition to schedules and models with greater in-school instructional time, some school leaders plan to continue to offer remote/hybrid options and increased flexibility for students (Schwartz et al., 2020). Two evidence-based strategies for advancing student-directed learning will be highlighted:

- *Personalized learning plans* encourage students to formally document their goals, interests, plans, and reflections on their learning experiences. Teachers, administrators, and parents can use students' plans to create learning experiences that reflect students' aspirations and needs.
- *Student voice and choice* is a concept that promotes student agency, advocacy, and leadership in classrooms and schools. Students are engaged as more active participants in shaping their educational experiences.

Box 3 summarizes these three interconnected strategies.

Box 3. Connected Strategies

Each broad strategy highlighted in this paper series can be implemented in ways that connect and support the other two strategies. For example, competency-based and authentic assessments can assess student learning during work-based learning experiences. Personalized learning plans can support students as they navigate flexible pathways to achieve their learning and career goals. Authentic assessments can include student choice. Taken together, the three strategies hold more potential as the basis for reimagining education systems. Schools and districts are well poised to braid together these and other known strategies to offer increased opportunities for students and families.



The R1CC team would like to thank the members of our advisory board for their collaboration on the development of this paper series, and for providing ongoing feedback and review of the series content.

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